

# A Multimodal Analysis of E.E. Cummings' Visual Poem *L (a*

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**Keywords:** Multimodal theory, visual poetry, modal decomposition, single modal meaning construction, multimodal meaning integration

**Abstract:** As a special style of writing, the linguistic and non-verbal modes of poetry are closely related to the social background and emotions to be expressed. This paper introduces the theory and current situation of multimodal research, the definition, historical development and types of visual poetry. Based on the theoretical framework of systemic functional linguistics and multimodal discourse analysis, this paper makes modal decomposition, unimodal meaning construction and multimodal meaning integration of English and Chinese visual poetry. The combination of the two modes of poetry makes the interpretation of poetry more accurate and comprehensive.

## 1. Preface

Traditionally, the analysis of poetry is limited to the level of language. Even for visual poetry, most of them only pay attention to the typesetting, combination and language intention of them, and seldom discuss the deep meaning and aesthetic feeling of poetry from the combination of form and meaning [1]. Through multimodal discourse analysis theory to analyze visual poetry, we can see the meaning of single mode more clearly [2]. At the same time, after integrating the various modes, it is easier for us to find out the function of each mode in the text and the artistic conception of the whole text. Therefore, using this theory to analyze visual poetry is helpful to understand the poetry better.

## 2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory

Modal refers to the channels and media used in the process of communication, including sound, image, color, skills, language, space, gesture and other symbol systems. The ability to combine different types of discourse and communication can be achieved through more than one production medium [3]. When people exchange or communicate, two or more symbol resources or symbol systems are multimodal. In daily communication, people often use two or more than two kinds of symbolic resources to express meaning and convey ideas, thus producing multimodal discourse. Multimodal discourse refers to the use of auditory, visual and tactile symbol systems for communication, through the use of symbols such as image, language or sound to achieve communication and interaction.

In the 1990s, Kress and Van Leeuwen began to study multimodal discourse on the basis of Halliday's systemic functional linguistics theory. They believe that language and other non-verbal symbols are the source of meaning. We shouldn't only pay attention to the information conveyed at all levels of the linguistic symbol system, but ignore the role of images, sounds, colors, which are presented with linguistic symbols at the same time, as well as the speaker's manner, mood and action in communication [4]. Zhanzi Li, a domestic scholar, introduced multimodal semiotics theory to China for the first time [5]. Zhang Delu, Hu Zhuanglin, Zhu Yongsheng and other scholars analyzed and evaluated the theoretical basis, research methods and practical significance of multimodal research [6], Multimodal discourse analysis has been widely studied in Poetry Interpretation, translation, political discourse, advertising copy and so on [7].

### 3. The Definition, Development and Types of Visual Poetry

Western visual poetry holds that all poems printed in written form are visual poems, and their creative characteristics are to change the visual form of letters or characters according to the poetic flavor. Western visual poetry comes from the exhibition of pattern poetry, which originated in ancient Greece in 1700 BC. After the development of history and the impact of culture, the pattern poetry had a strong religious feeling in the 4th century of ancient Greece. In the 13th century, a new image appeared in the development of visual poetry. Italian poet Nichol de Rossi wrote the first visual poem *star* in modern language. In the 16th century, pictorial poetry entered the second climax. Not only did the content and theme change from religious themes to folk themes, but also the language of poetry gradually expanded from Greek and Latin to other European languages. Oriental visual poetry is a special form of poetry, which is different from ordinary poetry, combined with the mood and emotion of poetry itself, the ingenious combination and arrangement of words, strokes, punctuation and other symbols can freely combine language elements to create visual graphics related to the theme, so that the content and vision can be integrated into one. Chinese modern visual poetry developed rapidly around the beginning of the 20th century, and achieved development in the 20th century. Due to the social unrest in the early 20th century, it was very difficult for poets to write, therefore, the development of visual poetry developed very slowly in this period. In the second half of the 20th century, the society gradually stabilized, the cultural industry flourished and developed rapidly, and a large number of excellent poets and works were produced.

There are three types of visual poetry in the west, which are language type, picture type and graphic type. Language style poetry is similar to traditional poetry, without visual images. Instead, it reflects the theme of poetry only through the variation of writing formats such as case, punctuation and space of words. There is no sentence in the text, but by breaking the writing norms of lines and stanzas in traditional poetry, pictorial poetry is presented by splitting words into visual images. Graphic poetry is a combination of figurative graphics and language to express poetry. There are various types of Oriental visual poetry, which can be divided into three types according to the characteristics of Chinese characters, such as shenzhi style, tongpang style, detached form, half-word thimble style, etc; According to the combination forms of Chinese characters, they can be divided into pagoda poems, flying geese, plate poems, Xuanji pictures, coherent style. These poems are based on the changes of the stroke structure of Chinese characters.

### 4. Interpretation of Visual Poetry from Multimodal Perspective

Multimodal discourse analysis has accepted the view that language is social semiotic and meaning potential from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics; Secondly, he accepts the system theory and thinks that multimodal discourse analysis itself is also systematic; Finally, he accepts the metafunction hypothesis, which holds that multimodal discourse is as multi-functional as discourse

containing only linguistic symbols, that is, it has conceptual function, interpersonal function and textual function at the same time. "

In fact, the difference between visual poetry and ordinary poetry is that visual poetry creates different text form, stanza form, line form or shape according to different contents and thoughts and emotions. Poets, on the other hand, are created through words, punctuation and other symbolic forms. Bensen pointed out that multimodal expression can be decomposed into two or more single modes that express meaning simultaneously [8]. Multimodal discourse analysis combines these different meaning resources. Therefore, the steps of multimodal stylistic analysis of visual poetry are: modal decomposition, construction of single modal meaning and integration of multimodal meaning.

According to the standard of modal identification, visual poetry can be divided into two modes: speech mode and visual mode. Speech mode refers to the sign system of words, syntax, phonetics and so on. Visual mode refers to the expression form of these visual symbol resources, such as image, color, printing layout and so on. The following will take E.E. Cummings' visual poem *L (a* as an example to elaborate the meaning construction of different modes of this poem.

*l(a*

*l(a*

*le*

*af*

*fa*

*ll*

*s)*

*one*

*l*

*iness*

Most of E. E Cummings' poems have only one sentence, in which a variety of punctuation marks will be interspersed to enrich the content and artistic conception of poetry. There is almost no complete word or sentence in the whole poem, but if we do some stitching and examination, we will find that the poem actually inserts a leaf falls into loneliness.

## 4.1 Speech Mode

From the text, the poem has only four words and nine lines. After recombining the letters of "L (a", we find that it is mainly composed of "a", "leaf", "falls", "loneliness" and a pair of "()". As for the speech mode of the poem, we can use the three meta functions of language in Halliday system to analyze it. There are generally two views on the combination of the four words in the poem, one is "a leaf falls in loneliness", the other is divided into two sentences "a leaf falls. It is loneliness". The two understandings seem to be the same, but the artistic conception of creation is different.

### 4.1.1 Conceptual Function

Conceptual function refers to the function that language is used to express the speaker's internal experience world and the logical relationship between things. (Halliday, 1994)[9]It is mainly embodied by transitivity system.

If the poem is understood as "a leaf falls in loneliness", it contains a material process. Material

process is the process of expressing something. This process is usually represented by a dynamic verb, "mover" and "target" are usually represented by nouns or pronouns. As shown in Table1:

Table 1: Material Process

Actor	Process	Goal	Surroundings
A leaf	falls		in loneliness

From the above analysis, we can see that a leaf's behavior has no action goal, which indicates that the emotion that the author wants to express is loneliness and helpless. From the narrative technique of this poem, the poet uses the third person tone to narrate as a bystander, and writes about the floating leaves, which highlights the smallness and fragility of individual life. In the second understanding, "a leaf falls. It is loneliness" includes a material process and a psychological process. Psychological process represents the non-action process of "emotion", "cognition" and "feeling", which indicates the development and change of people's inner world. As shown in Table 2 and Table 3:

Table 2: Material Process

Actor	Process	Goal	Surroundings
A leaf	falls		

Table 3: Psychological Process

Sensor	Process	Phenomenon	
It	is loneliness		

From the above analysis, we can see that a leaf's behavior still has no action goal. Therefore, whatever the understanding, what the author wants to express is the meaning of loneliness. And the second sentence uses loneliness to indicate the theme directly, but how can the leaf feel lonely? The poet personifies this leaf, which is actually used to express his inner loneliness.

#### 4.1.2 Interpersonal Function

Interpersonal function refers to the function of language to express the speaker's identity, status, attitude, motivation and his judgment, inference and evaluation of things (Halliday, 1994) [9]. It is mainly reflected by the mood system and modal system. Mood structure reflects the interpersonal function of clause, including mood, tense and modality in traditional grammar, reflecting the variable of tenor in situational context.

No matter it is understood as "a leaf falls in loneliness" or "a leaf falls. It is loneliness", it is a declarative sentence, and the tense is in the present tense. The poet's poem is to describe the general reality, with narration as the theme. It is neither a recollection of the past, nor an expectation for the future, nor an unusual accident or imagination. It is something that can be seen everywhere in our life and happens from time to time. It is a realistic thing that everyone has experienced and can understand. But this poem, according to our English reading rules, seems to be incomprehensible on the surface, only one word has meaning. It is by this way that the poet conveys the message of "a leaf drifting alone" and substituting the sense of loneliness into it.

#### 4.1.3 Textual Function

Textual function refers to the function of relating itself to the context of its users (Halliday, 1994)

[9]. It is mainly realized by theme rheme system. The specific expression is the word order and cohesive devices used by the author when speaking or writing an article. If the poem is understood as "a leaf falls in loneliness", the theme is "a leaf", and the rheme is "falls in loneliness". If it is understood as "a leaf falls. It is loneliness", "it is" here is completed by us, this clause can also be interpreted as, on the one hand, it can express the environment when a leaf falls, on the other hand, it can also express the desolate atmosphere created by "a leaf falling" and the lonely environment at that time.

## 4.2 Visual Mode

Seen from a distance, the poem is a vertical line, which can also be seen as the number "1". From the perspective of content, the poem shape actually represents the scene of a leaf falling. Anyone who has observed the scene of fallen leaves knows that the leaves are spinning, sometimes lifted by the wind, sometimes sinking, and finally falling to the ground. The lines "af" and "fa" in the third and fourth lines of the poem perfectly reproduce the scene of leaves whirling down and falling, the poem "s" in the sixth line vividly reappears the situation in which the leaves rise and fall with the wind, struggle and finally fall to the ground helplessly. From the text, punctuation and typesetting, the theme of the poem is "loneliness". The letter "L" runs through it. In Cummings' time, typewriters were used to write. The letter "L" and the number "1" correspond to the same key on the printer; finally, the seventh line of the poem is "one", which echoes with the poem form "1". Therefore, the emotion expressed in the whole poem is "loneliness". The whole poem is written in lowercase letters, echoing "leaf". It also means that in the world, all individuals are as small as leaves, and so are people. They all have to go through life and death, lonely and old.

There is only one punctuation mark, namely "()", which encloses "a leaf falls". In fact, ("represents the beginning of falling leaves, while") "means the final end of fallen leaves ----- falling to the ground. The whole process is the end of leaf life, and actually represents the final end of all life in the world. The individual is small, and these individuals are surrounded by "loneliness" from birth to death.

Therefore, the whole poem highlights the theme of "a leaf falls) in loneliness" in the visual mode, which means that people go through the whole life like leaves and end their lives alone (Halliday, 2004) [10].

## 4.3 Multimodal Meaning Integration

Both the visual effect and the connotation of the poem emphasize "loneliness", the poet not only expresses his loneliness by falling leaves, but also makes every reader feel his own loneliness, which is the interaction between the poet and the readers. In addition, the visual mode and speech mode of the poem form a complementary relationship, and the visual effect makes up for the lack of speech. Through the image symbols, the poet not only uses visual poetry to present its implied meaning, but also deepens the connotation of the poem. It is just in this way that the poem can be read endlessly and endlessly.

## 5. Conclusion

Traditionally, the analysis of poetry is limited to the level of language. Even for visual poetry, most of them only pay attention to the typesetting, combination and language intention of them, and seldom discuss the deep meaning and aesthetic feeling of poetry from the combination of form and meaning. Through multimodal discourse analysis theory to analyze visual poetry, we can see the meaning of single mode more clearly. At the same time, after integrating the various modes, it is

easier for us to find out the function of each mode in the text and the artistic conception of the whole text. Therefore, it is a good method to use this theory to analyze visual poetry

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